



ILLUSTRATING BETTER BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

—SUBIR ROY*

"All visual art concerns itself with the production of images." The image can be produced on paper, film, canvas, cloth, metal or any other material. It can be two or three dimensional. In the case of books, we have a limitation. The surface generally used for reproducing the image in book publishing is paper. The image, that is the illustration, which is created on the basis of the story-line or a given theme is responsible for creating the visual impact that the book provides to its reader.

How does an illustrator go about it? Normally, there is a discussion with the editor or the author at the time of handing over the assignment. The illustrator reads the story carefully—very often more than once, the situations which are suitable for illustrations are marked out. While

doing this, he always keeps in mind what would draw reader's attention, excite his imagination and compel him to read the story or the book.

It can be a historical story, an adventure story, a story of human interest, science fiction or perhaps a story narrated for the very young readers—which is normally a picture book.

Whatever it is, after choosing the illustration-worthy situations, he begins to look for reference. A historical story must have the right kind of costumes, the correct architecture, if it has any historical characters in it and the portraits should be authentic.

I remember working on a script recently, which had Jawaharlal Nehru as one of the main characters. There was a situation

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Has attended workshops organised by the CBT and the British Council information Centre jointly under the guidance of Mr. Charles Keeping from Britain, and a three week Workshop on Book Illustration by the Asian Cultural Centre for UNESCO at Tokyo 1984. He was selected for participation in B.I.B. in Bratislava, where his book *THE WOMAN AND THE CROW* earned him a 'Special Mention' by the jury.

where Nehru was having a meeting with the farmers in Swaraj Bhavan. After preparing a rough sketch for the composition of the picture, I began to look for a photograph of Nehru which could be used as a reference. The one I used was a typical one, where Nehru was seen attending a gathering in Punjab—his body bent slightly forward, and a facial expression as if trying to emphasise a point in his speech.

This image was juxtaposed with a picture of a gathering of kisans and part of the architecture of Swaraj Bhavan was shown in the background. While composing such a picture, one has to be careful about certain details, like perspective—which is most important. Then the source of light in the Nehru photograph and the other objects in the illustration must be the same. The style or technique while illustrating from different references must be identical, so that it does not seem as if different pictures have been put together.

In an adventure book or in a science fiction, it is very challenging to create visually the right atmosphere of the story and the characters. For example, the illustrations and the illustrators who contributed to create the character of supersleuth Sherlock Holmes. When they first appeared in the "Stuart Magazine," most of the stories were illustrated by Sidney Paget. But later on, other artists took over and they also did a remarkably good job.

For an illustrator, it comes very handy if he or she can maintain a "rogues' gallery" which is really a portfolio containing photographs and sketches of several persons—men, women, children and pictures of common animals like dogs, horses, cats, elephants etc. While developing and depicting a character, these photographs become very helpful as reference points and help to make the illustrations realistic or down to earth.

It is very often found that when a Euro-

peans illustrator draws an Indian character, it looks very much like an "Angrez" with a dark skin (mostly with a turban) and vice versa.

In the case of illustrations for science fiction stories, it helps if the illustrator has acquired a lot of skill in realistic and mechanical drawings. While working in colour, using air brush which gives fantastic effects is very much in demand. A great deal of skill is needed to handle the air brush. For the shape of space ships, one normally goes by the aerofoil method which is scientific and helps the space ships glide forward in space with the least hindrance.

When there are things like aliens, asteroids and the landscape of an unknown planet inhabited by strange creatures, the artist's imagination is unleashed!

Books meant for the lower age-group are normally picture books. Of course, there can be other varieties also, like pop-out books, scratch and small books etc. But these are more like toys than books. So we shall discuss only picture books here. How does the mind of an illustrator work when he handles a picture book? The pictures he draws are his version of the story. Before he finalises the technique/style of the illustrations etc., he normally prepares a rough dummy, sometimes on a smaller scale where he decides on the layout of the page, composition of the pictures, break-up of the text (i.e. how much text should come on a given page), number of pages etc.

In a picture book, since the text is little, there is a possibility that the author of the text has simply narrated the story without going into much detail description of a place or a character. It is the illustrator's job to build up these things on the basis of the hints the author has left in the story. Here he can and does take liberty.

The illustrator is very careful about the

image he creates in a picture book. A close-up picture of just the head creates a certain impact. A long-shot of a situation, on the other hand creates a different kind of an impact. He arranges the compositions in such a way, that the bow of the story is maintained throughout.

Different artists have tried and preferred different techniques over the years, to illustrate their picture books. There was a time when use of full figures of the main characters in pictures was very popular. It was like presenting the characters on a stage, where you always see them in their full form. But the idea of introducing close-ups of the face, half or three-quarters of the figure, use of one object or part of it in the foreground, and other characters or group of objects, or even the main action which is taking place in the picture in the background has also become very popular now. The latter is an influence of photography. In fact, one often comes across good picture books which have been heavily influenced by the cinema in terms of visuals and break-ups of the scenes.

We artists wish to illustrate better books, better than the books that are published. For that, we want better working conditions, better manuscripts to work on and of course, enterprising publishers. And last but not the least, a hearty recognition from all those who are connected with books for children.

It is very often said in seminars and workshops on book production, that "children's books should have good, attractive and colourful illustrations", "Artists working in this field should be imaginative and possess lots of ideas" etc. They mean well. But what is the actual situation?

A book illustrator, unlike his counterparts in the world of painting, is never taken as seriously as he should be. They are a faceless lot, like the person who provides paper for printing. Someone who just provides a

definite service. There is hardly any mention, let alone objective discussion of the illustrations in a book review. Once the illustrations are "bought" and published, the illustrator is forgotten. The art work lies in the cold storage. Nobody is bothered about their artistic value. No one cares for the research and experiment done to create a certain picture. There is no exhibition or auction of the original art works. In fact, for many, there is no difference between a signboard-painter and a creative illustrator or a paste-up artist or a letterer. In most cases, it is just a question of finding an artist (whatever he is good for) and getting the job done!

We do not have any agency in India which could function as a consultant/agent for the illustrator and the publisher. In most of the cases, there are a handful of co-ordinators in the publishing world who have the necessary understanding and training to look and judge a good illustration or a good cover picture. In fact, when one comes across someone who has the above qualities, it becomes a treat to work with him/her. And the publisher, in turn, gets the best out of the illustrator.

There are other problems also. Ours being a developing country, the materials used for producing books, like paper, printing ink, processing techniques like scanning etc. are not necessarily the best. And even if one opts for the best, the cost of the book goes up. In order to maintain a balance, one has to make a compromise.

But now, hopefully, the scene is changing. Lately, there have been a few more publishers venturing into the field of children's books with better illustrated and printed books. With books illustrated by imaginative artists with a logical mind, we have publishing professionals and editors, who are aware of the importance of illus-

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trations in a book and of the artist's name appearing with the author's name in the book. The remuneration which is being offered to the artists is slightly better. At least, it would prevent him from being lured away by the advertising agencies, where the payments are better.

Even so, there is still a lot which can be done. An annual or biennial exhibition of

illustrations of children's books awards for the best illustrations, a get-together of artists where they can open up their minds and share ideas, would be welcome.

With all this, we can look forward to better books for children. Books which would help the child to develop in all respects and would give us a generation better geared to run this world after us in the future.